

A Wicked Issue – The case of Dominic Cummings and who speaks for the North-East

by Richard T Kelly

Democracy has its discontents; and one of which we hear a fair bit is the fear that our elected politicians don't really speak for us, don't share our daily concerns, because they haven't walked a mile in our shoes and wouldn't much care to. It might be that such fears are felt especially sharply in the north east, a place that considers itself uncommonly apart: distinctive, but hostage to neglect by successive London governments.

Politically, who really speaks up for the north east? Do you need a special set of credentials or *bona fides*? Must you be from here? Should you have the coalminer's grit in your eye? And even if you have license to speak, does anybody actually hear you? Or are you so far removed from power as to be handily ignored?

Back in 2004 the north east firmly rejected New Labour's offer of its own elected assembly. So, on paper, it might seem a good thing if the region could boast, instead, of sending local figures to the heart of national government. And yet, relatively few Northumbrians – people born here and marked on the tongue – have ever attained such heights.

Probably the most significant such figure in my lifetime is Dominic Cummings: chief aide to the Prime Minister, born and bred in County Durham, and fond of peppering his infamous blog posts with claims of special insight into what people really think on the streets of Darlington and Easington.¹

Of course, nobody elected Cummings to his high office. He's an appointee who won favour by work behind the scenes; a strategist, gifted in reading the runes of focus groups and minting slogans with which to fight high-stakes campaigns. It's in large part due to Cummings and his punchy phrase-making – 'Take Back Control', 'Get Brexit Done' – that our country is where it stands today, newly divorced from the European Union. The effect of Cummings has been to lay bare huge divisions within our society: he's undoubtedly a divisive figure. And yet the north east wanted Brexit, despite government warnings that it would do this region more damage than most. And so the north east must mark the sequel, and own the consequences of Cummings' experiments in government.

Cummings lives in north London now – indeed, the whole world has seen him being badgered by news media on his Islington doorstep. He has tended to greet them with some pithy rejoinder in which one can clearly hear his unvarnished Durham vowels: '*You guys should get out of London, go and talk to people who are not rich Remainers*'.² Cummings likes playing this us-and-them card. His friend and co-campaigner Matthew Elliott has proposed that he went into politics precisely in

¹ See <https://dominiccummings.com/2017/01/09/on-the-referendum-21-branching-histories-of-the-2016-referendum-and-the-frogs-before-the-storm-2/>; and

<https://dominiccummings.com/2019/06/26/on-the-referendum-33-high-performance-government-cognitive-technologies-michael-nielsen-bret-victor-seeing-rooms/>

² <https://news.sky.com/video/cummings-you-guys-should-get-out-of-london-11806180>

order 'to represent people who live outside London and people living in the north east, where he comes from'.³

Were that so, it would be good news for the region, no? Your view might depend on how much you believe that Cummings matches words with deeds. This is a question of sincerity and credibility – scales on which Cummings has, of late, been scoring rather low.

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In 2017 Cummings proposed – sensibly, I'd say – that it is 'foolish' to assess political arguments 'in terms of who is "nicer" and "nastier",' since there 'are lovely and loathsome people, liars and charlatans on both sides'.⁴ Since May of this year, though, Cummings has been striking the public as the sort of man to whom one takes an instant dislike because it saves time. 'Driving to Durham,' 'An outing to Barnard Castle' – simple phrases, suggestive of pleasurable pastimes to the average Northumbrian, have, thanks to Cummings, become synonymous with falsehood, impropriety in government, and jokes about Specsavers.

Cummings' highly personal interpretation of the COVID lockdown rules was seen by a big swathe of the British public as a flagrant exercise in personal convenience, violating a hard-won sense of national solidarity. In Cummings' subsequent refusal to admit he might have erred, much of that public heard an elitist arrogance – one rule for them, another for us. This was a hard knock to Cummings' reputation for knowing the minds of ordinary people, and a bigger blow still to the government he supposedly serves, costing the Tories double-figure approval points in the polls.

And yet, though guilty in the court of public opinion, Cummings kept his job, and we learned the worrisome truth that Boris Johnson cannot afford to lose his services, whatever the cost to the Prime Minister's authority and popularity. This is because Johnson has vanishingly few ideas about the purpose of his government, and requires minds such as Cummings to have them for him – most pressingly, about what the hell we're all to do for our living in post-Brexit Britain.

So, Cummings is going to be around in our politics until he decides not to be. In the north east, as elsewhere, we might do best to keep our scrutinising eyes on the worth or otherwise of what he has in mind for this government.

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Voting Tory in the north east has long been widely seen as a sinful habit for which you'll get wrong off your mam and dad. And yet at the election of 2019 the Tories acquired a stunning new set of Northumbrian voters to represent: a 'Red Wall' of Blyth Valley, Bishop Auckland, Darlington, Redcar, Sedgfield, Stockton South and North West Durham.

Research by Lord Ashcroft suggested that your average Labour-to-Tory defector was more persuaded by Tory pledges to invest in hospitals, nurses, and

³ George Parker, *Financial Times*, January 16 2020, 'Dominic Cummings has 'done' Brexit. Now he plans to reinvent politics', <https://www.ft.com/content/0bf8a910-372e-11ea-a6d3-9a26f8c3cba4>

⁴ Dominic Cummings, *Spectator*, January 9 2017, 'How the Brexit referendum was won', <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/dominic-cummings-how-the-brexit-referendum-was-won>

police officers than by the business of 'getting Brexit done'.⁵ So much, you might say, for the master sloganeer Cummings. But then, Cummings made plain before the poll that he wouldn't have accepted a Downing Street job had Johnson not assured him *'that he is determined to change the Conservative Party — change its priorities and change its focus so it really serves the whole country... especially for those who don't have lots of money'*.⁶ In other words, Cummings has made common cause with the Red Wall.

Do we believe him? For starters, it bears stressing that Cummings is no kind of Conservative, or even a Tory member, and is roundly loathed by a lot of Tory MPs. (I tend to think of him as a party of one – The Cummings Party, if you like.) Indeed he has characterised political parties merely as *'a means to an end — a means to improve lives'*.⁷ After the financial crisis of 2008 he spoke volubly of how an awful lot of London bankers deserved to be in jail, and how southern elites had been unjustly spared the pain while everybody else got lumbered with austerity. He sounded, in other words, a lot like Labour's traditional friends in the north.

Cummings is a fan of Dostoyevsky, that great poet of the notion that we are deeply divided within ourselves. In 2017 he observed that his experience of focus groups had taught him that *'the average swing voter... [is] both more left wing and more right wing than most people in politics understand'*.⁸ I wonder if this perception might also be applied usefully to the north east. It's not hugely 'diverse' by today's standard, but nor is it homogeneous. Just as it was never all flat caps, nor is it all Brexit. It contains ex-miners and metal-bashers as well as farmers (such as Cummings' father) and middle-managers and small business owners who don't feel that the Labour Party owns their vote.

The graft of politics – from vote-seeking to policy-making – seems to rely stubbornly on the idea of tribe, but Cummings has discerned that, for many, these old loyalties have receded. Such analysis helped to win the Tories their 2019 majority. What will Johnson and Cummings do with it? And what's on offer for the north east?

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It seems aeons ago now, but Boris Johnson began his premiership with a visit to Sedgefield Cricket Club and a candid admission that Britain has a severely unbalanced economy. It's no revelation that London and the south east enjoy the lion's share of public spending, the best wages and hyper-inflated house prices, while huge stretches of the nation such as the north east are left behind. Johnson at least acknowledged this 'wicked issue' – the term in political parlance for intractable problems that have defied past efforts at solution. What he then pledged was an

⁵ <https://lordashcroftpolls.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DIAGNOSIS-OF-DEFEAT-LORD-ASHCROFT-POLLS-1.pdf>

⁶ Dominic Cummings, *Spectator*, November 27 2019. 'Let's honour the referendum and get Brexit done', <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/dominic-cummings-let-s-honour-the-referendum-and-get-brexit-done>

⁷ <https://dominiccummings.com/2020/01/02/two-hands-are-a-lot-were-hiring-data-scientists-project-managers-policy-experts-assorted-weirdos/>

⁸ From a presentation at the Ogilvy Nudgestock conference, June 9 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tc4bl1yZLw>

agenda of 'levelling up': remedying through policy the grievances of those left-behind places.

Lest one despair that nothing ever changes, we should recall that the primacy of London is relatively recent, and a product of government policy. Back in the 1970s the capital was blighted by poor schools and public services, and an exodus of people and businesses. Then the Thatcher government deregulated the City, financial services ignited a boom, and UK manufacturing got hammered as the nation's flagship exporting industries became advertising, management consulting and public relations – the arts of selling hot air and processing bullshit so that you can't smell it.

Is it conceivable that any politician might do for the north east even a fraction of what Thatcher made possible for London? Call it unpalatable pragmatism, but even if 'levelling up' amounted to no more than brutal Tory vote-seeking, would that be so unwelcome if the north east received material benefits it otherwise wouldn't?

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It so happened that 2020 overtook all of us, and 'levelling up' segued into a post-COVID recovery raft hastily constructed to keep the economy afloat. Johnson has thus led a remarkably interventionist, high-spending Tory administration. But the record suggests this is much as Cummings wished it to be: after the 2017 election he lambasted the flailing May government for failing to end austerity and give Brexit voters some of the change they voted for.

Back in February the main bar to such change was the Chancellor, Sajid Javid, who was running a familiar Tory Treasury consecrated to prudent borrowing and a balanced current budget. Finding his position assailed by Cummings, Javid asked Johnson to choose between them. Thus we should have learned sooner that Cummings was indispensable, as Javid got binned for Rishi Sunak, who swiftly got on message via the big-spending budget of March.

After the election Cummings wrote cheerily of wanting to get the A1 north of Newcastle dual-carriaged 'in record time'⁹, and he clearly supported the government's promised fund for new urban transport infrastructure. The north east has suffered far too long for being too hard and too pricy to get around. Spending on transport is not 'levelling up' in itself, merely a precondition for it – but the north east needs as much of that spend as is on offer.

Top of Cummings' priorities, though, is a new 'British Research Agency' equipped to hugely boost government investment in scientific research and development for regions outside the 'golden triangle' of London, Oxford and Cambridge. The theory is that wherever the public purse aids science-led innovation that has private-sector application, then you get new kinds of skilled and well-paid jobs. The north east, being a public sector redoubt, can seem wary of this sort of wheeze, aimed as it is at cities and at graduates, and not at less qualified people in left-behind towns who might favour more familiar sorts of jobs in specialised manufacturing. But no government can wind back that clock: the most that can be offered is the future.

Cummings clearly wishes to shift the priorities and incentives of our education system, which doesn't, to his mind, produce enough students with the STEM-subject qualifications required to drive innovation. Like everywhere in Britain, the north east

⁹ <https://dominiccumings.com/2020/01/02/two-hands-are-a-lot-were-hiring-data-scientists-project-managers-policy-experts-assorted-weirdos/>

now sends more young people to university – but Cummings believes an awful lot of them are studying the wrong subjects.

Cummings himself read Ancient & Modern History at Oxford, so when he rails against the clotting of Westminster with ‘Oxbridge humanities graduates’, we can all hear the clanging, discordant irony. Cummings’ own STEM knowledge is self-taught, but he seems to want the state to promote for everyone an education of the sort he fashioned for himself during a sabbatical of private study in the breeze-block outhouse of his parents’ farm off the Darlington Road.

In one of Woody Allen’s witty skits¹⁰ he imagines the condemned Socrates imploring friends to explain to him what was so bad about his speech proposing that Athens be ruled by an elite of philosopher-kings. His pal Simmias suggests that Socrates shouldn’t have kept pointing at himself and coughing while he spoke. There’s a similar *amour propre* about Cummings, and he might still be insufficiently aware of it.

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In January 2020 Cummings published a blog post inviting individuals with specific competences to apply for work in Downing Street: data scientists, economists, policy experts, project managers, and – in a final, typical Cummings, flourish – ‘weirdos and misfits with odd skills’.¹¹ Which of those shopping-list items did the media choose to focus upon? You know the answer: it’s why columnists of no obvious charisma from the *New Statesman* to the *Yorkshire Post* have since felt so strangely relaxed about referring to Cummings as a ‘weirdo misfit’.¹² Still, if it’s the tendency of some who find themselves stigmatised to retreat into a mute and chastened shell, others will make a great performative show of their stigmata, as if to say we’ve not seen the half of it yet. And Cummings appears to possess that unabashed streak.

Where does he get it from? It may be of note that his mentor at Oxford was Professor Norman Stone, a staunch and right-wing Glaswegian who was thoroughly at odds with an Oxbridge establishment that regarded him sniffily as a showboating provincial outsider. Stone told another of his favourite students, the future historian Niall Ferguson, ‘I wear my enemies like medals’.¹³ Here, I sense a certain resemblance, and these proudly awkward traits strike me as quite Northumbrian, too. Cummings reminds me of some of my more disputatious relatives – people who sometimes seem to want to embody the apartness of the north east at an interpersonal level. Politics is traditionally an art of compromise, persuasion, consensus. But, much as he denies it, Cummings seems to like stepping on toes – telling people directly that they’re bloody well wrong and, frankly, not up to it. And perhaps he has liked it just a bit too much.

¹⁰ Woody Allen, ‘My Apology’, in *Side Effects* (Ballantine, 1981)

¹¹ <https://dominiccummings.com/2020/01/02/two-hands-are-a-lot-were-hiring-data-scientists-project-managers-policy-experts-assorted-weirdos/>

¹² Consider Kevin Maguire <https://www.newstatesman.com/international/2020/09/commons-confidential-rishi-sunak-s-indigestion> and Sir Bernard Ingham <https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/opinion/columnists/dont-blame-civil-servants-boris-johnsons-troubles-look-dominic-cummings-instead-bernard-ingham-2952936>

¹³ Niall Ferguson, *Sunday Times*, June 23 2019, ‘Norman Stone served up wise words to Thatcher, and Guinness and Nietzsche to me’, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/norman-stone-served-up-wise-words-to-thatcher-and-guinness-and-nietzsche-to-me-n0hs5d7jp>

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We all contain contradictions – me, and you, and Dominic Cummings. Contradictions within a programme of government, though, are less excusable, since they risk incoherence or even incompetence, and accusations of both failings now assail the government Cummings advises. The pandemic posed governments worldwide a new and terrible test of managerial competence. The UK government has not performed well, and Cummings in no way burnished his reputation. No one seriously doubts that he can diagnose a political problem and its underlying causes, but currently his record in overseeing delivery of solutions looks poor.

Any serious ‘levelling-up’ ought really to entail some devolving of decision-making powers (and authority over taxing and spending) closer to the localities where people are affected. And Cummings has repeatedly argued that a grave impediment to good government is over-centralisation: cosy civil service like-mindedness, insufficiently bold and diverse thought. Yet the busy summer of 2020 found him alerting Whitehall staffers that the Johnson government will now enjoy a ‘*smaller, more focused and more elite centre*’¹⁴, apparently to be filled by co-thinkers of Dominic Cummings. If one intention of this elite is to devolve more power unto the regions, then much the better for levelling up. Until then, we might see the putative philosopher-king pointing at himself again.

Will Cummings amount to more than his public image as a gifted copywriter for a hot-air-blasting, bullshit-processing government which over-promises and under-delivers? This autumn offers numerous tests of this question, as parliament confronts further foreseeable crises. Brexit is not done until our future trade relations with the EU are settled, and Cummings has hardly been all over the detail of the divorce he did so much to initiate. The north east still has big exporting manufacturers who will be damaged by No Deal. Whatever pledge Nissan might have made to remaining in Sunderland, a hard Brexit surely means the car-maker will expect government to cushion the blow. Over the summer of 2020 Cummings was known to be opposing any continued EU regulation of UK state aid, wishing instead for the government to retain the socialistic possibility of propping up favoured companies and industries. As one ‘insider’ told the *Financial Times*: ‘*They just want to be able to bung money at things*’.¹⁵

But the well of public spending to which Cummings felt Brexit voters were entitled has been greatly drained by COVID, with government debt over £2 trillion. Number 10 can’t bung forever without raising revenue by taxation, but on whom will that axe fall? Affluent Tories of the shires and market towns will say, as ever, that it’s not their bill to pay. This is where Johnson and Cummings must decide how deep is their duty to Red Wall voters – and Red Wall MPs. Those voters were promised meaningful material improvements to their lives, but a new roundabout in Blyth Valley would be a meagre return on the bargain.

As for the MPs: as keenly as Cummings wants to see his British Research Agency established, it could yet require legislation – and Cummings has very few friends among Tory backbenchers, who have felt his scorn or neglect, yet still were

¹⁴ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/hard-rain-is-going-to-fall-on-civil-service-says-dominic-cummings-gcq79vcl0>

¹⁵ Peter Foster and Jim Pickard, *Financial Times*, July 27 2020, ‘Cummings leads push for light-touch UK state-aid regime after Brexit’, <https://www.ft.com/content/e29430c7-9dae-440e-8093-74f705ce62c3>

expected to defend the indefensible over his lockdown breach. Votes in the Commons are where these backbenchers could be Cummings' collective nemesis.

Cummings has often, rather airily, declared that he won't outstay his welcome in government. Does he have the mettle to stick around for the harder part of what lies ahead? Or might he privately decide that it's beyond his abilities? He's always got his book-lined bunker off the Darlington Road. He might call it a day with his civil service reforms complete (in which case he could conceivably claim to have made himself redundant by self-replication: the creation of an army of clones). Since all political careers end in failure, such a legacy might be rated adequate. But will Cummings then have done anything much to '*serve the whole country*', '*to improve lives*', to resolve the wicked issue of '*the north east where he comes from*' or to otherwise cash the numerous cheques he's written with his mouth? Any verdict as of today is premature; but in the end, just like all of us, he will be judged.

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